

## **“Embracing Your Limitations”**

**June 16, 2019**

### **Ecclesiastes 1:1-14**

**SI:** We’ve spent six weeks meditating on some selected Psalms, and for the next four weeks we’re going to ponder and wrestle with a very unusual book of the Bible—the book of Ecclesiastes.

So please open your Bible to Ecclesiastes chapter 1.

I’m not going to preach through the whole book, only on four selected passages. But hopefully this study will pique your interest and you’ll read the whole thing.

**INTRO:** I want to relate three different conversations I had with Christians that raised questions in my mind about how God does things.

In the first conversation someone was telling me how he had a flat tire.

It upset him because it delayed him getting to an important meeting.

But when he finally got underway he came upon a terrible wreck on the interstate and he said that God had delayed him in order to protect him.

If he hadn't gotten the flat tire, then he would have been in that wreck.

When he told me that I wondered: Is that how God works?

Did God really give him a flat tire to keep him from getting into a wreck?

Why didn't God just keep the wreck from happening?

And what about Christians who do get in wrecks?

Why doesn't God give them flat tires too, and keep them out of wrecks?

The second conversation was someone telling me about a man in ministry who believed God wanted him to plant a new church in a particular place.

Church planting has about the same success/failure rate as starting new business.

Surveys show a primary factor for success is funding.

Church planters with five years of financial support mostly make it.

Which this man didn't have, but God had given him a vision and he was passionate about that vision. He was claiming Jesus' promise: I will build my church.

But the church plant was a flop and he became angry and disillusioned.

I wondered: Does God take into account passion and sincerity, if so, why does money seem to play such an important role?

The third conversation was with a couple we know, also in the ministry.

Their young daughter had lost an ovary due to ovarian cysts.

Then they sent us a desperate email asking us to pray because her remaining ovary had gotten twisted and the doctors said was probably going to lose it.

So we prayed and a few days later they told us the ovary had been saved.

But then two months later when they went for a follow up, the doctors said:

We're sorry, we were wrong. Her ovary was lost. Your daughter is sterile.

They were devastated.

They emailed and said: We're trusting the Lord, but we're grieving.

I was amazed at their faith but I wondered: Why did God do it that way?

Why did he make them think for two months that their prayers were answered, when all along their prayers had not been answered as they had hoped?

That seems a very strange way of dealing with people.

Ecclesiastes is part of a group of books in the Bible called the wisdom books. Job, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, a few of the Psalms, and Ecclesiastes.

In the New Testament, James is a sort of wisdom book.  
The OT wisdom books are not about the way of salvation through Christ,  
they are instructions for believers about living rightly and well in God's world.  
That's important to remember. I'll say it again.

The wisdom books are not about the way of salvation through Christ,  
they are instructions for believers about living rightly and well in God's world.

You can be a born again Christian, heading for heaven and eternal life,  
but be unwise in the way you think about and respond to any number of  
important issues of life.

That's why you sometimes see unbelievers whose families and children and  
marriages and finances are more stable and happy than some Christians.  
Because they have appropriated certain aspects of biblical wisdom.

That wisdom doesn't save them, faith in Jesus alone saves, but even as  
unbelievers that wisdom enables them to function well in God's world.

The wisdom books overlap each other in important ways,  
but each one has its own particular subject or theme.

Job is about suffering,

Song of Solomon is about romantic love and marriage,

Proverbs is about many topics of everyday life—money, speech, parenting.

What's Ecclesiastes about?

It's about the perplexity of life and our limited understanding of God's ways.

There's nothing taught in Ecclesiastes that you can't find elsewhere in the Bible,  
but the way Ecclesiastes teaches it makes this book especially beautiful and  
thought-provoking and perplexing.

A book about the perplexity of life and God's ways that is perplexing.

As I said earlier, I'm not going to preach through the whole thing—

I'm going to cover four passages that give the big idea and main themes.

So let's start by looking at the opening passage and we'll do so under two points:

1. The perspective of the book
2. The purpose of the book.

## **MP#1 The perspective of Ecclesiastes**

I know two sisters, close in age, who are adults.

One sister says their parents were good people who provided a stable, loving, and happy home.

The other sister says, No, our parents were judgmental and emotionally distant—it was an unhappy home.

The first woman says her sister is just blaming her own unhappy life and negativity on their parents, but the other one says her sister is a Pollyanna who has closed her eyes to reality to keep the peace.

Two very different perspectives. I imagine that if you could play an old video of them at the supper table together one sister would say: See, just an normal family! And the other one would say: Can't you hear the tension and unhappiness?!

I tell you that to illustrate that Ecclesiastes is understood and interpreted in two dramatically different ways.

There's not another book of the Bible that has Christians coming down on such different sides of the fence. So let me tell you the two different interpretations.

One says that the author of Ecclesiastes, this man who calls himself the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem—that he is either an unbelieving skeptic, or he is a or a depressed, cynical, backslidden believer, or he's a believer who is depicting life from an unbelieving viewpoint.

There are different arguments for which of those is most accurate, but they all essentially boil down to the same thing—

They say that the perspective of Ecclesiastes is life apart from God.

If you don't know God, if you don't know Christ, this is your life—meaningless.

The other interpretation says that the author of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem is a believer with a deep and unshakable faith in God.

He's describing life as it really is in God's world.

He's teaching believers how to understand life and God's mysterious ways.

And he's giving believers a perspective for living wisely and happily.

I'm sure you can see that the perspective you adopt will make a huge difference in the way you interpret every statement in Ecclesiastes.

Are we reading true observations about life that will help us live wisely, or are we reading the mistaken impressions of a foolish and unbelieving man?

I'll tell you right now that I think the second perspective is the right one.

The Teacher is a believer with a deep, unshakable faith in God.

He's teaching us how to live wisely and happily in God's world.

I certainly understand why some people don't get that impression.  
Right off the bat: Meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless!  
Can a man or woman of faith actually say that?  
Don't we believe everything has meaning in God's world?

And there are many statements that at first sound so downright pessimistic.  
Listen to these verses from chapter two.

Then I thought in my heart, "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" I said in my heart, "This too is meaningless, For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!"

The book of Proverbs says over and over that the wise man will be rewarded and the foolish man will be punished.

It sounds like this man is saying the opposite, that there really no reward for trusting the Lord. The same fate will overtake them both.

So I certainly understand the impression some people have reading Ecclesiastes that Christians can't talk this way, so this must be an unbelieving perspective.

And it's here in the Bible basically to show us how bad life is without God.  
But there are huge problems with that take on the book.

The first problem is that once you get past the jarring way these things are said, you realize they are not just true, they are obviously true.

Let's take those verses I just read:

The wise man and the fool both die and are both forgotten.

How many people in the world still remember your great-grandfather by name?

Was he a fool or righteous? Who even remembers anything he did?

That is a fact we have to come to terms with.

Righteous people are often poor and wicked people are often rich.

Ecclesiastes makes this point several times and isn't it perfectly true?

Isn't there a great deal in life that defies our explanation even as followers of God?

Of course there is.

Ecclesiastes 3.

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.

A time to be born, a time to die, a time to weep, a time to laugh, and so on.

You know the passage and Pete Seeger's famous song.

Isn't it absolutely true of life?

And sometimes doesn't the juxtaposition make your head spin—when in the same week, for example, a parent dies and a grandchild is born.

So the teachings in Ecclesiastes are obviously true of life.

That's one problem with interpreting the book from a perspective of unbelief.

The second problem is simply that there are a great many places where the Teacher expresses a beautiful, robust faith in God.

He believes in God's ultimate justice.

He believes in God's goodness and he recognizes and celebrates all blessings as coming from God's hand. Let me just read a few.

A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?

I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him.

Although a wicked man commits a hundred crimes and still lives a long time, I know that it will go better with God-fearing men, who are reverent before God. Yet because the wicked do not fear God, it will not go well with them, and their days will not lengthen like a shadow.

None of that sounds like skepticism or unbelief. It sounds like faith in God.

So this is how we're going to read Ecclesiastes,

from the perspective of strong, unwavering faith in the God of Scripture.

Ok, so how are we supposed to understand:

Meaningless, meaningless, all is meaningless from that perspective?

That brings us to the second point . . .

## **MP#2 The purpose of Ecclesiastes**

This statement about everything being meaningless is obviously the key thought of the book. It opens with it in 1:2 and closes with it in 12:8 and it occurs 32 times.

What does it mean?

It's the Hebrew word hebel which basically means breath or vapor.

It's used figuratively in Ecclesiastes so there are different translations.

Vanity, vanity is how the King James Version and others translates it.

The NIV which I read says meaningless.

The Message, which is Eugene Peterson's unusual Bible translation says:

Smoke, smoke, nothing but smoke.

Ok, vanity, meaningless, smoke—but what does that mean?

As you read Ecclesiastes you see that the author uses it in two different ways.

Sometimes when he says hebel he's simply making the point that things in this world are insubstantial. They are temporary. Pass away, like vapor or breath.

The Bible makes this point often about our lives and the things we possess.

Our lives like breath, grass, our wealth goes away, moth and rust, thieves, etc. So that's one way hebel is sometimes used in Ecclesiastes, that our lives and everything here is temporary and passing away, which is not hard to understand.

But the other way and the main way hebel is used is to make the point that many things in life we see and experience are so deeply mysterious that we cannot discover their meaning.

They are meaningless to us.

This doesn't mean they don't have a meaning in the mind of God or in the plan of God, but from our finite and fallen point of view, we cannot see the meaning.

We cannot see what God sees.

Ecclesiastes says:

I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time.

He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

We want to know, we have a longing to know meaning of things which God has placed in us, but we can't. And that's a burden.

Let me read a few more passages that illustrate this..

Behold, this is what I found while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things—which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found.

I want to know why certain things have happened, but I can't find out.

When times are good be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other. In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these. Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.

Why has this bad thing happened? What's going to be the outcome? Why God?

You're not going to find the answer to those questions in this life.

There is something else meaningless that occurs on earth: righteous men who get what the wicked deserve, and wicked men who get what the righteous deserve. This too, I say, is meaningless. . . . When I applied my mind to know wisdom and to observe man's labor on earth. . . .then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it.

A friend of mine suffered a horrendous injury and Christians claiming to be wise and in the know said: God brought this in your life to teach you this or that. He told me, If God really wanted to teach me some of these particular lessons, I can think of a dozen effective ways he could have done it. What they don't understand is that the pain is so bad that I can't even think about God or anything else.

What we know about life and about the meaning of things is, in fact, very little.

What we do not know is immense. It's not just Ecclesiastes that says this.

Isaiah 55 says:

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Romans 11:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out.

None of us knows what God is doing in the world except in the most general way.

Another friend of mine told me about some children whose mother died of cancer on Mother's Day. His comment to me was: When I get to heaven I'm going to ask God about that one.

Have you ever thought: If I were God, I wouldn't have let that happen.

If I were God, I wouldn't have done it that way. Of course you have.

Much of life can be wonderful and beautiful as Ecclesiastes often reminds us, and much of life can be dark and seem to be utterly senseless.

So how are we to consider all of this from the vantage point of faith?

That is the lesson of Ecclesiastes and what an important lesson it is.

A key insight is the constant repetition of the phrase "under the sun."

What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

This key phrase occurs thirty times.

Under the sun means life from the viewpoint of time not eternity.

It's looking at this world as it is, not the world to come.

Under the sun means the world as we see it right now, the world which the Bible



calls a vale of tears.

Ecclesiastes teaches us that as believers in a good and sovereign God, we must be humble enough and sensitive enough to admit we don't know what God is doing, especially in the disappointments and tragedies and dark mysteries of human life. This keeps us from giving people shallow cliches. It helps us show true sympathy.

And when you yourself are suffering these dark and inexplicable circumstances, and when you find yourself asking God why, and coming up without any answers, Ecclesiastes says that God in his wisdom has hidden from you almost everything you would like to know about his providential purposes which he is working out. He wants you to be humble, to walk by faith, to live the life he has given you right now, with both its joys and sorrows.

Let me finish this introduction to Ecclesiastes by reading you two summaries of the book from two wise men.

The world is not weighted in our favor (at least so far as we can see things from the perspective of "under the sun"). But the same things which break the man of the world, can make the Christian, if he takes them from the hand of God. Go looking for the key that will unify the whole of life. You must look for it; God has made you like that. But you will not find it in the world; you will not find it in life; in revelation you will find the outskirts of God's ways; in Christ your fingertips touch the key, but no one has closed his fingers on it yet. No philosophy of life can satisfy if it leaves out Christ. Yet even the finest Christian philosophy must admit itself baffled. But do not despair. There is a life to be lived day by day. And in the succession of apparently unrelated events God may be served and God may be glorified. And in this daily service of God, we may find pleasure, because we are fulfilling the purpose for which God made us.

Here's the second one:

It is a crucial part of true biblical wisdom to know how little you know; it was the great lesson that Job had learn: to live your life modestly, without assuming that you understand more than you do, without pretending to an understanding you do not have, and cheerfully to embrace your limitations as one of God's creatures, a mere human being, a tiny piece of a very great puzzle. Ecclesiastes will help you do that.